Race to the Top
Peer Reviewer Selection Process

Call for Reviewers

On August 31, 2009, the Secretary issued an open call for recommendations of qualified individuals to serve as application reviewers for the Race to the Top competition. The call was posted at http://www2.ed.gov/policy/gen/guid/secletter/090902.html. Individual applicants or those wishing to recommend qualified candidates were asked to send a cover letter and curriculum vitae to a designated email box (racetothetopreview@ed.gov). The Department received around 1500 peer reviewer applications and nominations.

Nominated Peer Reviewers

Program staff attempted to contact all individuals for whom a nomination (or recommendation) was received to inform them of their nomination and invite them to apply. In cases in which valid contact information for nominated individuals was not available, program staff attempted to obtain contact information. Nominated individuals who chose to apply were instructed to submit a cover letter and curriculum vitae to the designated email address by October 30, 2009.

Reviewer Selection Process

Each Race to the Top review panel will consist of five non-Federal employee reviewers. Program staff anticipated that it needed up to 70 reviewers (including alternates) for Phase 1 of the competition. The process for selecting reviewers was developed and implemented in collaboration with the Program Team and was approved by the Leadership Team.

Step One (1): Establish list of applicants.
Program staff finalized the list of nominations it received by the deadline for nominations and entered contact information for all reviewer nominees into a database created for this purpose. Program staff provided peer reviewer candidates with written expectations including dates for the review, information on conflict of interest screening, and confidentiality requirements, and requested that candidates provide written confirmation that they agreed with these expectations.

Step Two (2): Screen for expertise, experience, and potential conflicts of interest.
Using the qualifications outlined in the Secretary's call for reviewers, the program staff reviewed each application for evidence of (1) expertise in four key qualification areas: education policy, education reform, capacity and scale, application review and evaluation, and (2) experience in the four ARRA reform areas. To achieve consistency to the greatest extent possible, program staff used the groups listed below to categorize the reviewer applications. Program staff used applicants' resumes and cover letters to make the initial group determinations, and consulted with each other when applications did not straightforwardly fit into one of these groups.

- o *Group 1*: The application provides clear evidence that the applicant has expertise in 3 or more of the 4 key qualification areas AND experience in 3 or more of the 4 ARRA reform areas.

- *Group 2*: The application indicates that the applicant has expertise in 3 or more of the 4 key qualification areas AND experience in 3 or more of the 4 ARRA reform areas, but does not include sufficient evidence to include in Group 1.
- *Group 3*: The application provides evidence of expertise in 3 or more key qualification areas and experience in 2 or less of the ARRA reform areas OR expertise in 2 or more key qualification areas and experience in 3 or less of the ARRA reform areas.
- *Group 4*: The application provides evidence of expertise in 2 or less of the key qualification areas and experience in 2 or less of the ARRA reform areas.

Following the review, program staff developed a "Preliminary Candidates List" that included individuals in Groups 1 and 2. The Preliminary Candidates List included the following personal information: name, address, resident State, phone number, and email address.

Step Three (3): Initial Conflicts of Interest Review
Preliminary Candidates were contacted by email to undergo an initial conflicts of interest review and to confirm their availability to participate in the review. This initial review for conflicts of interest was conducted using an "Initial Conflict of Interest/Availability Checklist" developed by the Program Team in consultation with OGC's Ethics Division. Program staff worked with OGC's Ethics Division to review the responses to the initial conflicts of interest questions and removed candidates from the Preliminary Candidates List who had conflicts of interest (actual or perceived), as well as individuals who were not available for the review.[1]

Step Four (4): Reviewing for Prior Experience by Program Team
The applications of individuals who remained on the Preliminary Candidates List after Step Three were reviewed by members of the Program Team. Using the criteria outlined in the Secretary's call for reviewers, the Program Team considered each application (resume and cover letter), as well as the individual's performance on previous work for the Department, if any, (e.g., serving as a reviewer for another competition or program, performance as a contractor or subcontractor). The Program Team recommended the applicant for further consideration by Senior Staff or removed the applicant from the Preliminary Candidates List.

Step Five (5): Reviewing for Expertise by Senior Staff
The Department convened a group of four senior career staff and four senior political staff to review the applications of individuals remaining on the Preliminary Candidates List following Step Four. Senior staff participating in this review had expertise in the four ARRA reform areas and knowledge of experts in the field (e.g., institutions of higher education, nonprofit organizations, State and local education agencies). Using the qualifications outlined in the Secretary's call for potential reviewers plus knowledge of a candidate's performance in the field, applicants were rated as either "1-exceptional," "2-good," or "3-acceptable." Individuals rated as "3" were removed from the Preliminary Candidates List.

Step Six (6): Reviewing for Prior Experience with Program Offices
The Preliminary Candidates List from Step 5 (individuals rated either a "1" or a "2" by the senior staff) was shared with program offices that frequently use peer reviewers for their competitive grant competitions. These offices included the Office of Special Education Programs, the Office of Innovation and Improvement, the Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools, and the Institute of Education Sciences. Each office was asked to identify individuals who have reviewed applications for their offices in the past and did a thorough job.

---

[1] All SEAs are potential applicants and all LEAs are potential "participating LEAs" for the purposes of the Race to the Top competition. Therefore, all candidates currently employed by SEAs or LEAs (including public charter schools) as of the start of the review were removed from the applicant pool.

Step Seven (7): Approval by Program Team and Leadership Team
Based on the reviews by program staff (Step Four), senior staff (Step Five), and program offices (Step Six), program staff presented the Preliminary Reviewers List to the Program Team and the Leadership Team for their review and approval. The list included approximately twice as many reviewers as were expected to be needed for the review in order to account for attrition due to final conflict of interest checks (Step 8) and any changes in the reviewers' availability. The Preliminary Reviewers List was reviewed and approved by the Program Team and the Leadership Team.

Step Eight (8): Final Conflict of Interest Check for Final Peer Reviewer List
Program staff and OGC's Ethics Division developed a Final Conflict of Interest Form that individuals on the Preliminary Reviewers List were asked to complete. Based on a review of the responses, candidates were (a) cleared (and invited to serve), (b) contacted by phone to clarify responses to questions; (c) deemed to have an indirect conflict of interest for which a waiver could be granted; or (d) deemed to have a direct conflict of interest for which a waiver could not be granted. Individuals cleared to serve and available for all required elements of the review were included on the "Final Peer Reviewer List." Individuals who were deemed to have conflicts of interest for which a waiver could not be granted were contacted by phone to explain the conflict and told they could not review for the Race to the Top competition.

Step Nine (9): Issue Letters of Invitation
Program staff emailed letters of invitation to individuals on the Final Peer Reviewers List and invited them to secure travel arrangements. Included with the letter of invitation was an agreement from the Department through which the reviewers acknowledged the need for integrity in the review process, confidentiality with respect to their role as a peer reviewer, and understanding of the conflict of interest review and requirements. By accepting the invitation to participate in the initial peer reviewer orientation, reviewers agreed to abide by the reviewer guidelines in order to protect the integrity of the peer review process, ensure a level playing field for all applicants, and avoid bias and potential or real conflicts of interest.

Step Ten (10): Contact Individuals Not on the Final Reviewers List
Program staff emailed letters informing individuals who were not on the Final Reviewers List that their services would not be needed, but that they may be contacted in the future to review for other Department grant competitions, including Phase 2 of the Race to the Top competition.

Reviewer Guidelines

At a minimum, reviewers are required to agree to the following guidelines:

1) Reviewers must commit to participating in all required trainings and in both Tier 1 and Tier 2 of the review (if applicable[2]).
2) Reviewers will attend and participate in all panel discussions.
3) Reviewers must review and score independently all applications assigned to them and evaluate each application based solely on the selection criteria and priorities.
4) Reviewers will provide constructive written comments.
5) Reviewers must consider only the information in the application to assign points to the selection criteria and may not introduce other materials.

---

[2] A reviewer will not participate in Tier 2 if none of the applications he or she is responsible for scoring is selected for Tier 2.

6) The five reviewers assigned to each Race to the Top application are exclusively responsible for decisions related to the scoring of these applications. (Program staff, including panel monitors and the competition manager, will not provide reviewers with evaluative guidance on the content of their comments or the accuracy of their scores beyond guidance necessary to ensure that reviewer comments clearly address the scoring criteria and justify the reviewer's scores.)

7) If at any time during the review process, a reviewer becomes aware of a conflict of interest (either actual or perceived) with an application he or she is reviewing, the reviewer must notify the panel monitor and/or competition manager immediately of this conflict.

8) Reviewers will review applications only in secure, non-public locations in order to protect the confidential content of applications.

9) Reviewers will not discuss applications, the review process, or other information to which they are given access based on their role as a reviewer at any time outside of when it is necessary in order to fulfill their official capacity as a reviewer (i.e., reviewers will only discuss the content of applications in the panel discussion room while the designated panel monitor is present).

10) Reviewers are to use only the contents of the application (as provided by program staff) to make decisions about the scores and comments submitted. Reviewers are prohibited from using outside information (such as that found in Web searches) to make a determination about the scores and comments submitted for an application. Reviewers will not access Web links included in applications, as this could constitute outside information.

11) At no time during the competition will reviewers communicate with representatives of the media, applicants, or others outside of those designated by the program staff, until they have received explicit, written permission from the Department to do so.

12) Presentations and Q&A with reviewers will be video-recorded during the Tier 2 review process. These recordings will be made public at the conclusion of each Phase of the competition on the Department's Website.

13) Reviewer comments and scores will be released publicly.

14) The names of all peer reviewers (including alternates who attend reviewer training) will be released publicly at the end of each Phase.

15) Reviewers will sign a confidentiality agreement before accessing applications.

16) Applications are to be read and reviewed only by the peer reviewers assigned to them by the Department. Reviewers are prohibited from sharing the content of an application or the application's appendices with anyone outside of the designated review panel and with designated program staff.

17) During any stage of the review process, reviewers may have unscheduled time during which they will be required to remain onsite but will not be providing services to the Department. Reviewers will be informed of the possibility of "down time" and the availability of computers and internet services for them to use during such times.

Honoraria

Reviewers will receive an honorarium of $5,000 for their services. Reviewers who serve as alternates will receive $400 for participating in the reviewer orientation. In addition, alternates who are asked to review applications will receive $1,000 plus $520 per application reviewed.

Honoraria for peer reviewers or alternates may not be distributed until the completion of Tier 2. That is, for all reviewers or alternates (even those who do not participate in Tier 2), honoraria will be mailed to their preferred address at the conclusion of Tier 2.

Travel, Lodging and Per Diem

The Department will reimburse reviewers for their travel, lodging, and per diem expenses for any applicable portions of the review that require travel. Reviewers will be reimbursed for these expenses soon after their travel is completed for each stage of the review (for example, a reviewer who participates in the pre-review orientation, Tier 1, and Tier 2 will be reimbursed for travel, lodging, and per diem expenses soon after travel is completed for each of these stages of the review).